

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

January 7, 2021

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Robert R. Redfield, M.D.
Director
U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30329

Dear Secretary Azar and Dr. Redfield:

We write to express our concern that rural communities are falling behind in the COVID-19 vaccine distribution. To end the devastation caused by this pandemic, the vaccine must be available to all Americans. As Members of Congress representing a rural state and its many rural communities, we impress upon you the importance of ensuring equitable access to the COVID-19 vaccine in rural areas across the country.

We are deeply proud of the American innovation on display in the development and distribution of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines. We recognize that the task ahead of us to vaccinate the majority of the American population is one of the largest public health initiatives this country has ever undertaken. That is why we are highlighting the disparities within rural communities to you now so we can quickly remedy this situation as the rollout of the vaccine progresses.

As part of the rollout, the Administration is relying upon large health systems located primarily in large, urban areas. While this ensures the vaccine reaches a high number of people, the concentration is on urban health care workers and residents. Unfortunately, this model has created delays and hurdles to supplying the vaccine in the rural communities we represent – communities that are often home to America's most vulnerable patients.

We do not need to tell you that the coronavirus is spreading at alarming rates in rural areas of America. In December 2020, 25 counties with the highest rates of reported cases per capita had populations of fewer than 50,000 people; 18 had fewer than 10,000. We recognize the many difficulties in ensuring safe vaccine distribution in rural areas, including ensuring cold storage, transportation, and limited health care professionals. Please let us know how we can provide congressional support in addressing and solving these challenges. What works for urban areas often does not work for our rural communities; the approach needs to be adjusted to be effective. We must rely on a community-based effort and out-of-the-box thinking to ensure our rural citizens have access. Our local grocery stores, pharmacists, churches, small businesses, and residents will gladly rise to this challenge if only they are called upon.

Please feel free to contact Denise Fleming in Congresswoman Axne's office at denise.fleming@mail.house.gov or Brittany Madni in Congresswoman Hinson's office at madni@mail.house.gov should you have in questions.

Sincerely,



Cindy Axne
Member of Congress



Ashley Hinson
Member of Congress